"FOX-HOLE RELIGION"

Some weeks ago, we began an informal, spontaneous series of three sermons. The first one was entitled "Nursery Room Religion". The second, following that at a two or three week interval, was "Mature Religion". Our discussion today is concerned with "Fox-Hole Religion".

I would like to just mention the leading points of those other two sermons, to give you a background, or to refresh you in that background. You will recall that there were four or five characteristics of "Nursery Room Religion". First, the individual places himself at the focal point of all the Universe. Things happen just to him. Secondly, he is unable to comprehend, understand and accept evil in the world. A third mark is the inability of the individual to delay his responses, to pause and consider before acting, and the incapacity to work for a distant good that he, himself, will never enjoy. The fourth is the way in which people build their religion upon their feelings and desires rather than upon evidence. The fifth mark is the refusal of the individual to subject his ideas, beliefs, religion and life to criticism.

Now, Mature Religion, of course, simply reverses those statements, in large part. Among the ten factos of Mature Religion which I gave you were the following: 1. A mature person accepts this world as one. He can only know what he can know, that is, that which can be proven and tested. He rejects the supernatural. 2. He is willing to have his beliefs subjected to all the criticism that logic and science can invent as being rigorous and objective. 3. He is willing to have his group criticized, and he is capable of rising above his group, of seeing the source and root of some of the ideas and prejudices which his groups give him. 4. He regards his group activity as a way in which he can better discover the Will of God, and better serve God, not as an expression of his own ego, and certainly not as the end object of his devotion.

5. The mature individual dedicates himself to building his religion upon evidence, not upon his desires. 6. He is willing to accept responsibility for himself, for other people, and for the growth and development of good, and for his own need and necessity of discovering the good that rules the world. 7. He is willing to subject himself to the disciplines necessary for greater knowledge of God. This is to say he is willing to subject himself to the painful process of growth.

8. The mature person is distinguished by the way in which he reacts to crises. He regards them not as dangers, but as opportunities for reorganization. 9. In like manner, the mature person is distinguished by the way in which he accepts failure and success, not as final failure and final success, but as prods to him to rediscover the things that he is striving for; to make sure that this failure is really a failure, and this success really a success. This type of self-less and detached judgment is a high achievement. It is dependent upon genuine faith in God and a mature religious spirit.

10. The mature person--and this is the essence--is one who subjects everything, everything! to his devotion to God, that is to say to the goodness and efficacy of love. He is perfectly content while striving to discover the meaning of love and its exemplifications for any situation, to leave the issue to God. The object of his devotion is that which is supremely worthful to all men. Thus he is not dependent for his well-being, his peace of mind, and for his feeling of success upon the achievement of any one particular good or any group of goods. His ultimate loyalty is not to any particular good but that which makes possible all good. That is as hard and as sweeping a statement as I could make, but it is the chief mark of maturity in religion. Very few of us even approach understanding it, much less living on it.

Now, this Fox-Hole Religion. What is it? It is a religion developed under pressure. It is pressure religion. It is based on the text, if you will: "There are no atheists in fox-holes." When a man is under pressure, and threatened with his existence, facing odds that seem insuperable, he is no longer an atheist, because he no longer believes in his self-sufficiency, in his own capacity; and he is anxious to have the Divine aid of God to rescue him. Pressure religion is Fox-Hole Religion.

This is a perfectly normal reaction, and I want to be sure you accept and understand it as such. We are all that way. I warrant there is not a person in the Congregation this morning who hasn't found himself in the situation where he says, "I can't do this. God, if you get me out of this thing, I will do anything for You the rest of my life." There is not a person who has not been pushed into a corner where he felt he needed more help than he, himself, could command, and called on God to give it to him. When these youngsters get out into these awful situations--far tighter spots than most of us have ever found ourselves in--and they need help, it is perfectly normal for them to look for it in that way.

There is a romanticism attached to this thing that I want you to notice, and this romanticism is serious. It arises mostly in the Air Force. In the last war, they were the Galahads and the individualists, fighting romantic battles, letting the enemy go when he found himself in a tight spot, and his guns would not shoot. There was a lot of galantry. That is not so much true in this war, but there is the same romanticism attached to the Air Force. As a result of this individualism and the peculiar nature of the danger, most of our fox-hole religious terms have come from them. We find them talking about the "Old Man", meaning God, the "Great Flying Boss in the Sky", and the "Man Upstairs", and "My Co-Pilot." We find movies being made of men who have died in the Service, coming back to sit in the pilot seat with the newer fellows, and being sent there by God Who was dressed in the uniform of a General of the Air Force.

It is celebrated in song, book and picture, and it is romantic. You can not help being intrigued by it, and you automatically accept it because it is good. You like to think that that is the way it is. You would be ashamed to reject something that was so apparently important to these soldiers. That is the great danger of it. We transfer our affection and love, our delight and pride, our sympathy and understanding for these men to the ideas that some of them produce. It is a common mistake in logic. Because you admire and love the individuals, you take the ideas of one or two of them explaining their feelings, and you give them equal authority in your lives with your love for the individuals; and that doesn't necessarily follow, you see. They may be wonderful people, and all the things that they need may be summed up in that kind of a story, but their explanation of it is not necessarily correct.

There is a tendency to make God our mascot. Yes, to make God our mascot! And to romanticize and glorify religion along with the glorification of war, because the only way you can go on fighting a war is to keep it glorious.

This Fox-Hole Religion is Nursery Room Religion. It follows at least two of those criteria of Nursery Room Religion very thoroughly. One of them is the incapacity of the individual, because of his immaturity in spiritual matters, to face up to the presence of evil in his own life and in Society. But in and behind that, there is that childhood desire of each one of us to regard himself as the focal point of all that happens, so that when things go wrong, we feel that everything is concentrated on hurting us; that the stars and the sod, mountains and rivers, all the elements are aligned, and are directing themselves against us.

The exact opposite is also possible, and this is one of those facts most of us conveniently overlook. When anything good comes to us in moments of crises, when it looks as though we couldn't do anything on our own, and yet are saved, we feel that it must have been God Who did it. That all the Universe rearranged itself, and concentrated upon saving us. But this, too, has serious implications. You must never, never think that the Universe is concentrated upon goodness, without, at the same time, remembering that it must also apply to the evil in the world. My caution on that will become clear as we go along.

Nursery Room Religion has these characteristics. First of all, it is extremely selfish. It is always "Me". "Me". God save "Me". I have read book after book that has come out on this sort of thing, and they are still flooding the presses, calling upon the Universe to concentrate on saving "Me". It is noteworthy that seldom, if ever, does this type of religion give expression to the idea that perhaps the individual could be doing something for God. It is a one-way funnel with the large end at God's side, and He pours His gifts in; and they come out in the narrow end to "Me." It is difficult to understand how selfishness of this nature can be associated with God, and a religion built upon it.

Secondly, it is almost always physical. I may be a little extreme on this subject, but I just do not believe--important as it is--that physical well-being is the chief end of God. Yet this type of religion, while it may talk about the mind and that sort of thing, only talks of it with a viewpoint to being healthy; and to being saved. Saved how? The body saved.

A third thing I want to say about it is that it is always a request that the individual be saved from a situation. This is important. Saved from a situation; removed from a danger. It is never a request that he will be saved in the situation. We should begin to think about a religion that will save us in the situation, and about a God who will be helpful to us in the midst of evil. Too long now, and I mean by long, for centuries, we have been worshipping a God who would take away evil, and it doesn't happen. Maybe that is why we have made so little progress in eliminating evil.

There is a long history to this type of religious thought. It has been going on for centuries because it is so normal to think this way. We have always thought this way. Religion grew up in this kind of attitude, because you see, when our race was young, (I mean younger than it is) we lived in a world that was inhabited by nothing other than Japs and Huns and Communists. Everything and every creature was an enemy. We had no strength in our weak, pitiful, little bodies. We did not have particularly good eyes or ears, just a mind or brain, and an organism that was developing in its nature into something that was beautiful to look at and to behold. Here were animals all around us, ready and eager to destroy us. Here was a world we did not understand. It took us a long time to even find the value of fire to keep us warm, and clothes to put around us, and instruments to help us. We were pitiful, cringing little things running from danger; and everything was a danger. We didn't know much. We did not know anything about ourselves. We had little or no language, and we didn't know anything about our world. We needed protection, and so when something happened to one of our members that was dangerous, there must have been an evil spirit in that; and that thing must have designed to get us. When anything good happened to us, we noted the circumstances under which it occurred, and we found something there that would seem to be a good spirit working. Now, why should that stone have tripped that man and broken his arm? Something evil there. Why should that bird have flown down just when we needed food so badly? There must have been a good spirit there. So the thought system developed. The old-fashioned Bedowin, wandering with his flocks and family, dying from thirst and exhaustion in the heat of the desert, would come over a little knoll and suddenly see before him the oasis which would

save him and his family and flocks. When he saw that cooling shade there, it was something beneficient and good; and so he built a shrine in that place and it was holy ever after.

The things that helped were holy and good and godly. The things that hurt were devilish and sinful and evil. In the Roman Empire, when a man wanted to conduct an important project, he caught birds and opened them to see the message that the internal organs of the bird would give to him. He thought the gods took this way of speaking to him for the gods were everywhere. There were gods of the hearthstone. There were gods of the entry. There were gods of your profession or trade. There were gods of the trees, forests, lakes, fish and the animals. The whole world was inhabited by them because everything could be good or evil. Men were always explaining the evil that came to them by their failure to observe the messages sent by the deities, or by evil spirits that had it against them; and explaining the good that came to them by the fact that they had gained favor with God, and now God was rewarding them. Why stop with the Romans? It has come on down to our day. It is the kind of religion most of us have. It is the kind of religion ninety-five per cent of church people have. We are still living in our immature past, and still ascribing the good things that happen to us to God's favor; and the evil things to God's disfavor. It is all so absurd, so illogical, so mean, and so belittling to God.

You have heard the numerous stories, in the present day, of men who have put their airplane down in the middle of the Pacific, and live for days on a raft in the blazing sun. They are in a bad way. They have a Bible, and they read, and pray that God will help them; and God sends a bird to sit on the edge of the boat and gives them food to keep them going. At a time when normally it would not rain, He sends rain to give them water to drink. Finally, in the end, He changes the wind and the current so that they will be sent in a certain direction; and when they are all about to die--and one of them has already--they are discovered. God has been the cause of it. One of those men then uses this miraculous rescue as the basis for his entry into the Ministry.

Another group is forced down, and an unusual change in the current took them into an island. Some aborigines had a feeling that they ought to go to that island to fish, and though they knew they wouldn't catch any fish, went to the island anyway, found these men; and saved them. God did it all.

A shell hits a ship and blows in a steel door, and it slams across the room occupied by ten or twelve men. Not a man is hurt, and God is held responsible for it, and given credit for their protection.

A man on a ship after the Pearl Harbor attack is concerned because his wife will be worrying lest he had been in Pearl Harbor at that time and been injured or killed. The Chaplain prays that his wife will be informed so that the sailor will not worry, and the wife divines in a dream that he is all right. The Chaplain then claims it is God who did it to save the sailor from worry so that he could fight better.

These are sentimental tales, and they are close to some of us and I know I am on dangerous ground in speaking of them, but can't you see how utterly absurd it all is? The funnel of goodness from God, but what about the evil? What about the fact that when that steel door was blown open, a dozen other men in the ship were killed by the shell? What about all the men forced down in the oceans and not saved? What about the men who were found by the aborigines and promptly cut up? What about some of those very devoted God-fearing Christian people whose airplane didn't come back in spite of the prayers? If you say God saved you, then God must have killed this other fellow sitting there beside you. How can we avoid this logical conclusion? That makes God a very nasty kind of person. You see it

is the primitive Great Man idea, a flying boss in the sky, picking out people that he will save, changing winds and currents, going to all the bother to tell this woman that her husband was safe when there were hundreds killed and their families didn't know about it. Why does God save one and not the other? Can you imagine a world ruled by the whimsy of prayer? Can you imagine a God swayed by the influence of individuals? All the good doesn't happen to good people, and all the evil doesn't happen to bad people. This approach to religion makes God a great tyrannical boss, and it is all created because we are not mature enough to take evil and to understand it and appreciate it.

Consider it simply from the stand point of the kind of means that God uses to do these things. Instead of waiting until the men are near exhaustion and death, He could have saved them in a more spectacular way, and sooner. Why do you suppose a God that has all that power would allow this war to come, and let it go on? You say, "Oh, to try the spirits of men, and to make them better." You know that war, so far, has never made the spirit of man any better; and you also know that a God who had that kind of a power could very readily find other ways of improving the spirit of man with a miraculous demonstration. He could stop the war in such way that not a person would be left in doubt as to the power of God. The answer is that He doesn't do it because He isn't that kind of a God, and He doesn't have that kind of power.

A friend of mine was talking to a group of Marines who had been through all those awful early battles, starting at Guadalcanal. One chap said, "When I was sitting there in that hole, I knew I couldn't do it. I knew that I had to go from here to there, and I knew that I couldn't make it. I needed some help." And he added, "I made it. I prayed, and I made it; and I had a wonderful feeling of exhilaration that I was sure was religion. God did it! And I was all excited and pleased, until I looked around. Then I found that Bob hadn't made it, and I wondered why. He too had prayed and he was a better person than I. Then I knew there was something wrong with that kind of religion". That is the way his reasoning went, and those are almost exactly the words he used. He could see in the heat of battle that there was something wrong with that religion of his in the fox-hole; and there is. It can't last. It isn't good enough. It is too immature and too childish. It is the kind of religion that springs up quickly because it is so strong at the moment, so comforting, so helpful, and so encouraging. It is like the wheat that was sown on thin soil. It sprang up very quickly, but when the heat of the day came, it withered and died. When the Marine stopped to think about it all, and to rise above his selfishness, he realized that it couldn't be, and that it can't be. There is absolutely nothing to support it, nothing to justify it except our sin, our selfishness and our lack of spiritual understanding. They have been enough these five, ten, fifty thousand years to keep us in our spiritual childhood. Unless we are careful, they will keep us there now. No matter how bad may be the experience of those who come back, they will know that there is little value in fox-hole religion. They will know that kind of a God doesn't fit in with this kind of a world, and they will begin to be suspicious of the God they have built up in their minds.

One sergeant from the last war--a very thoughtful person--wrote these words in a letter to me: "these fellows who are coming back from this thing will either be dead as dodos, or they will know there is something new in the world." Dead as dodos, or they will know there is something new in the world; and they'll know that this thing has come about, not because of God, but because of ourselves. I hope there will be enough of them who will want to know why. Why! Why and how!

The only kind of religion that will save us in a religion that is deep enough and broad enough to include the fact that you were saved and Bob was killed; and that the Germans and some Japs are worshipping the same God, and attributing their success to the same source that we are attributing ours.

It will have to include all the facts. It will have to be deep enough and broad enough and thorough enough to be able to explain and to comprehend the evil that abides with us, and will continue to abide with us. It will have to be a religion good enough to be able to save us in the midst of our sin, not rescue us from our peril. It will take deep understanding, and this does not usually spring up quickly. It grows, so painfully slowly. But we have had enough, I trust, of things that come quickly and are wonderfully "Successful": Dictatorships and War. Why don't we now begin to put our faith and energy into things that come slowly like Democracy and Love? Why don't we begin to work for them, knowing that they are slow, but striving underneath to find those basic principles which, when we find them, will lead us into that Promised Land--we, or our children. Surely we shall not again be misled by the men who sell brilliant achievements on a low level and of unworthy nature. Surely now we shall work on this thing we have never yet really tried, but which has impressed itself on our consciousness, in our better moments, as being the true achievement, so the work that we have done, the building that we have builded, oft with bleeding hands and hearts, will stand at last triumphant in that day that is to come.